



# Mental Health Among College and University Students

## > ISSUE 1

Upstream Initiatives to Improve Mental Health Among College and University Students

## > ISSUE 2

"Succeeding" with Cognitive Enhancers: A Coping Strategy for Academic Performance

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### > ISSUE

## Upstream Initiatives to Improve Mental Health Among College and University Students

Mental health is a concern for postsecondary students. Currently, almost one-third of students suffer psychological distress (Grégoire et al., 2016), the highest proportion for any age group (ISQ, 2015). Psychological distress affects students' overall well-being, including their ability to stay in school and succeed (Martineau et al., 2017). Despite their efforts to support students, postsecondary institutions are seeing a significant increase in demand for mental health services, which they are struggling to meet (Grégoire et al., 2016).

**Prevention and promotion strategies** for improving the continuum of mental health services are now considered key to improving mental health, preventing the onset of mental disorders, and reducing their symptoms. These upstream strategies include early interventions (MHCC, 2012) for all students, whether they suffer from mental disorders or not.

By strengthening most students' capacities and meeting their various needs, including through the use of upstream strategies, specialized intervention services can be used more effectively by students with specific clinical needs.

*Whether you're talking about postsecondary education settings in Quebec or abroad, experts agree that approaches focusing solely on students with problems are not the most effective or sustainable way to improve mental health. (INSPQ, 2017)*

### Improving Students' Mental Health

Improving mental health and preventing mental disorders are the basis of upstream initiatives. They have two objectives:

1. Maximize good mental health for as many students as possible
2. Minimize the number of students with poor mental health or symptoms of mental disorders (INSPQ, 2017)

## PROMOTION

Promotion of mental health is characterized by a positive approach aimed at all students, regardless of their mental health status. Its objective—maximizing students’ mental health—is achieved by addressing protective factors (Mouvement santé mentale Québec, 2018).

A coordinated set of actions is required to maximize students’ mental health. These must include “Improvement in living conditions, the implementation of standards and regulations that reduce social inequalities in mental health, better access to resources and services in the various communities, and greater youth participation in economic and social life” (INSPQ, 2017).

## PREVENTION

Prevention aims to reduce the presence of risk factors that can undermine students’ mental health and ability to deal with their mental health status (Mouvement santé mentale Québec, 2018). It seeks to help students develop the skills to deal with challenges in various spheres of their lives: academic, social, family, etc.

Promotion and prevention are separate concepts that are both interrelated and complimentary. (INSPQ, 2008)

## Developing a Continuum of Mental Health Services

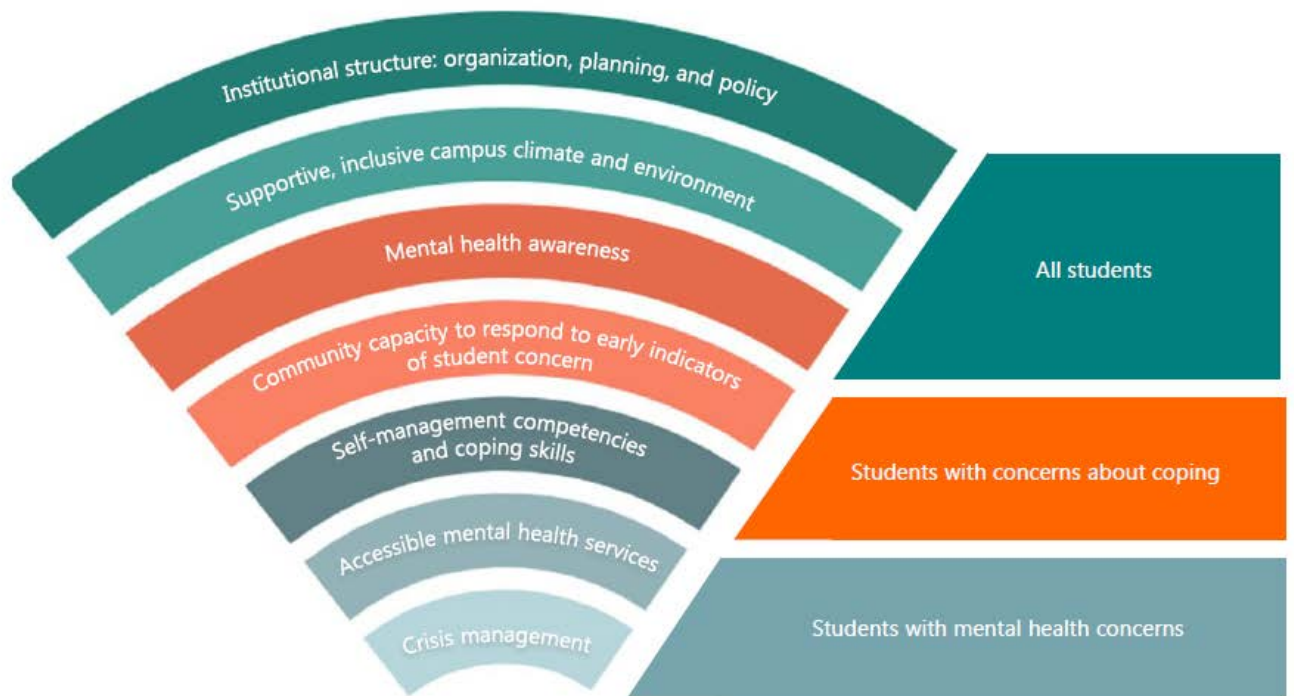
Meeting the growing demand for psychosocial mental health services is a mounting challenge for educational institutions. Although most institutions offer a range of services, most of them are geared towards treating and resolving problems rather than preventing them.

The majority of students’ needs can be met by prioritizing strategies that strengthen protection factors for all students (promotion) and targeting students with specific risk factors (prevention) (Paré and Marcotte, 2014).

Institutional will is required to develop a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages student participation in order to build such a continuum (CACUSS/ASEUCC, 2013).



## Framework for Postsecondary Student Mental Health (CACUSS/ASEUCC, 2013)





## Further Information

### Tools and Websites

- [Healthy Minds | Healthy Campus](#)
- [Je concilie](#)
- [Labo Marcotte](#) (Research laboratory on youth mental health in educational settings)
- [Mouvement Santé mentale Québec](#)
- [Korsa](#)
- [Je tiens la route](#)
- [HealthyMinds](#) (app)
- [Transitions: Making the Most of your Campus Experience](#)
- [Zenétudes sur la transition](#)

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- Canadian Association of College & University Student Services/Canadian Mental Health Association (2013). ["Post-Secondary Student Mental Health: Guide to a Systemic Approach,"](#) Vancouver, BC.
- Mental Health Commission of Canada (2012). ["Changing directions, changing lives: The mental health strategy for Canada,"](#) Calgary, AB.
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- Martineau, M. et al. (2015). “Rehaussement des interventions en santé mentale. La démarche d’implantation du programme Je tiens la route!” Research report (abridged version), PAREA program.

## Articles

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- Doré, I. and Caron, J. (2017). “Mental Health: Concepts, Measures, Determinants,” *Santé mentale au Québec*, 42(1), 125–145.
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- Paré, M. L., and Marcotte, D. (2014). “La consultation de services psychologiques chez les jeunes adultes : enjeux et pistes de solution,” *Psychologie Québec*, 4 (31), 29–31.



### > KEY CONCEPT

#### What is the Transition to Adulthood?

Young people age 19–25 complete their postsecondary education at the same time as they transition to adulthood. This pivotal period is marked by important decisions and new roles. It is unique to Western cultures, which associate the transition to adulthood with key events like having children, becoming financially independent, living independently, taking on responsibilities, and making independent decisions (MHCC, 2015).

Not all young people have the same internal and external resources to cope with this period of instability. As a result, some develop psychological difficulties. Almost one-third of young people age 15–24 have a high psychological distress index, the highest proportion of any age group (ISQ, 2015).

Transition to adulthood: in industrialized societies, the period between adolescence and adulthood during which young people continue to develop. (MHCC, 2015)

During this period, it becomes possible to determine whether a person will develop a mental disorder (MHCC, 2015). Although the transition to a higher level of education may contribute to the difficulties young people experience, the period of development itself is believed to have a bigger impact on the mental health status of postsecondary students (Kutcher, 2015).

Given that academic success is closely linked to students' mental health (CACUSS and ASEUCC, 2013), a significant proportion of students may not have the means to persevere in their postsecondary education (Martineau et al., 2015). Adequately addressing the needs of young people transitioning to adulthood requires coordinated initiatives and actors who are attuned to their reality (INSPQ, 2017). By developing a comprehensive approach that includes upstream initiatives and individualized services, we can support young people in all aspects of this transition, thus promoting mental health and preventing mental disorders.

A continuum of mental health services must be developed to support postsecondary students during this transition. (MHCC, 2015)

## Characteristics of Emerging Adults (Arnett, 2004)

### 1. INSTABILITY

When tackling major life projects, young people often run into difficulties that force them to reconsider their goals, which explains their frequent changes in areas of study, relationships, jobs, and place of residence.

### 2. EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY

Young people continually try out different options in an effort to understand who they are and who they would like to become, especially in terms of their careers and relationships.

### 3. SELF-CENTEREDNESS

Young people tend to delay important adult responsibilities (marriage, parenthood, etc.) in order to enjoy their freedom (without parental interference). They tend to focus on themselves and their own needs.

### 4. IN-BETWEEN

When asked if they are adults, young people often answer “yes and no.” They often feel that they need to meet the three criteria for adulthood—being responsible for themselves, making their own decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2004)—before they can be considered full-fledged adults, but feel much more independent and mature than they did as adolescents.

### 5. POSSIBILITY

Young people often have a very optimistic future outlook and truly believe they will fulfill their dreams and overcome past circumstances (e.g., an unhappy family life) to become the person they want to be.

While this portrait provides a better understanding of emerging adults, it is important to look at the **circumstances** in which individual characteristics develop. Individuals must not be the sole focus for intervention (INSPQ, 2017). Actions to reduce **social inequalities** also help improve students’ mental health.

## References

- Arnett, J.J. (2004). *Emerging Adulthood: the Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.
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### > KEY CONCEPT

#### What Are Mental Health and Mental Disorders?

Mental health is state of well-being that allows all individuals to realize their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their community (WHO, 2014). In this sense, it is much more than the absence of mental disorders (WHO, 2016).

It is possible to have good mental health and have a mental disorder (MHCC, 2012), but the absence of disorders does not necessarily signify optimal mental health. Mental health status is not static, it fluctuates over the course of life depending on the situations an individual encounters (INSPQ, 2017).

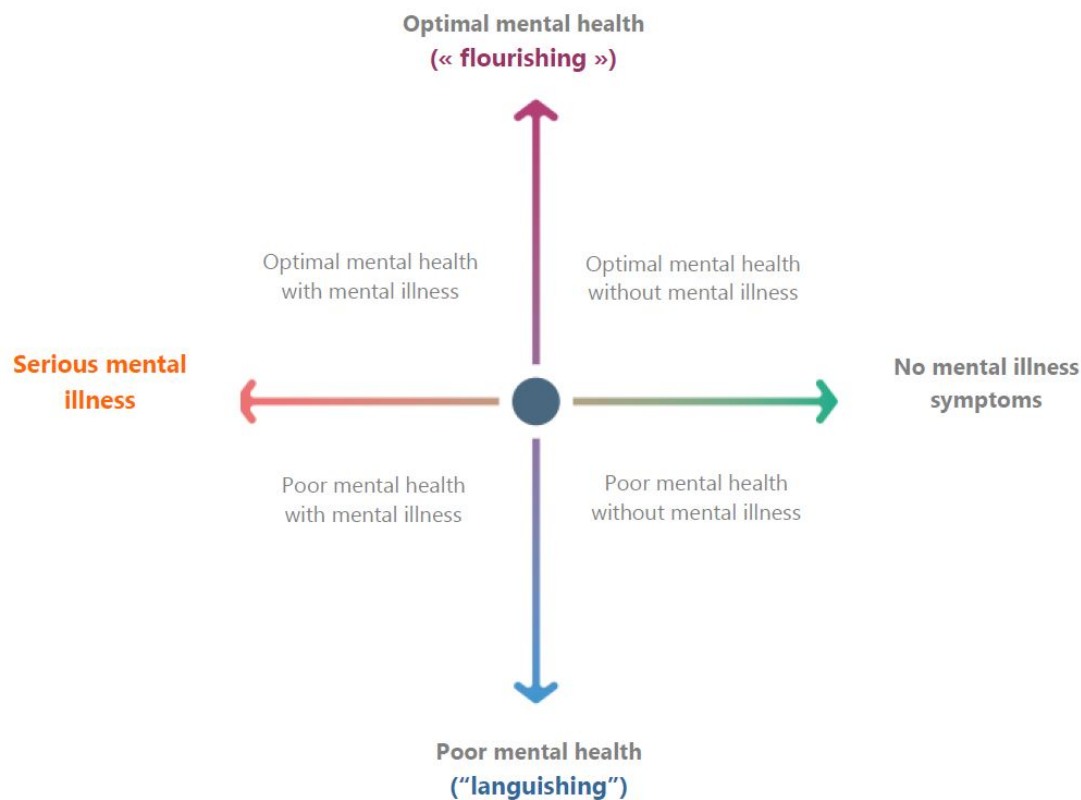
*In the same way that physical health is defined apart from illness, mental health is separate from mental illness and is a great deal more than the absence of mental illness. ([Santé mentale Québec – Chaudières-Appalaches, 2017](#))*



(Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=5&v=G8BWW24KE\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=G8BWW24KE_w), CAMH, 2015)

## Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health and Mental Illness

(CACUSS and ASEUCC, 2013; Doré and Caron, 2017)



The international tendency in mental health is to focus on upstream strategies for promoting mental health rather than trying to “fix problems” (INSPQ, 2017). These strategies generally target the entire population. Creating conditions conducive to good mental health for students has a positive effect on all students, including those with mental disorders (ibid.). Supporting capacity building for students helps equip them to protect themselves from life’s pressures and difficulties and helps reduce their risk of developing mental disorders (MHCC, 2012).

Improving mental health requires taking *upstream* action to address conditions that affect mental health for all people, whether or not they have mental health issues, without compromising the support required by individuals with specific problems (INSPQ, 2017).

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### > INSPIRING PRACTICE

#### Project – *Je tiens la route!*

*Je tiens la route!* is a forum for discussion, strategies, and resources on mental health issues that was established to promote mental health among students at Cégep de l'Outaouais.

Under the coordination of psychology professor Marc Martineau, a number of stakeholders pitched in to implement measures to raise awareness of the importance mental health at Cégep de l'Outaouais. A mental health task force (organized by the Student Affairs Department) made up of students and professors put together posters, theatrical performances, activities, and presentations to raise awareness among all Cégep employees and many students. Student-led works are always central to the activities in this program.

Each activity directs people to [Jetienlaroute.com](http://jetienlaroute.com), a discussion forum (blogs, surveys, activities) complete with resources (books, research articles, videos, health websites, support resources, etc.) and strategies for promoting mental health.

Far from being limited to individual actions, this model calls on everyone at the institution (professors, professionals, administrators, support staff, and students) to get involved and help develop policies that promote physical and mental health for all. (Website <http://jetienlaroute.com>)

#### Approach

The approach is based on a very simple metaphor: outfitting a car with four good winter tires so it stays on the road during snowstorms. Each tire represents one of four focal points that are critical for overall balance:

- Improving physical fitness and maintaining good general health (physical tire)
- Getting more in touch with your own personal strengths and adopting adaptation strategies (psychological tire)
- Strengthening social ties and the ability to seek help (social tire)
- Taking part in something greater than you and/or developing a spiritual life (quest for meaning tire)



Each tire includes a series of strategies:

- Improving your physical fitness
- Using your strengths
- Strengthening your social ties
- Giving your life meaning

## Objectives

The *Je tiens la route!* project calls for individual and collective actions that help everyone take better care of their own mental health and do more to help improve that of others. In addition to implementing strategies for achieving better mental health, it also builds college students' resiliency and ability to cope with stress.

On an institutional level, the project aims to develop:

- A knowledge translation program to be implemented on an ongoing basis to facilitate integration of new evidenced-based practices
- Prevention and promotion strategies that fit with the needs of Cégep de l'Outaouais students
- Strategies that reach large numbers of people to maximize mental health impacts for students and staff
- Student participation in developing these strategies so that student involvement remains the project's driving force
- A mental health prevention/promotion program at Cégep de l'Outaouais that follows the same guidelines as the École de santé approach and an institution-wide approach that involves all community members
- An evaluation of the approach and its impact

## Results

The mental health task force and student teams have designed and implemented many strategies, including a website and Facebook page; posters, theatrical vignettes, and other activities in public spaces at the Cégep; presentations for all employees and hundreds of students; video contests; *journées orange* mental health awareness days; and so on.

Cégep de l'Outaouais administration fully supports the program and is looking at ways to integrate best practices in mental health prevention and promotion, including as part of its success plan. Initiatives such as the development of a consortium that includes the *Je tiens la route!* project, suicide prevention sentinels, and Défi Santé illustrate the Cégep's ongoing efforts to stand united in promoting all aspects





of student health. In addition, Cégep staff members determined to see the program continue have founded a *Je tiens la route!* community that heads up the program's activities each year.

The initiative's success is a source of inspiration for other colleges and universities looking to improve their students' mental health.

Researchers urge all educational institutions (primary, secondary, and postsecondary) to develop specific policies on the overall health of their students and contend that all decisions made by administrators at every level must take these policies into account.

The *Je tiens la route!* project has made headway in Belgium where it has been adopted by the Department of Social Affairs in the province of Liege, which funded and supervised its rollout in postsecondary institutions across the province. This forum for discussion and exchange offers information on social health, diet, sports, and stress management, as well as activities, advice, and an attentive ear to help young people experience college under the best possible conditions.



### ***Further Information***

- Martineau, M. et al. (2015). "Rehaussement des interventions en santé mentale. La démarche d'implantation du programme Je tiens la route!" Research report (abridged version), PAREA program.
- *Je tiens la route!* Research project on improving mental health at the college level.
- <http://jetienslaroute.com/>
- *Je tiens la route* (Facebook page)



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### > INSPIRING PRACTICE

#### Project – *Korsa*

*Korsa* means to cross or traverse in Swedish. It's also the name of a series of workshops designed to help college and university students cope with stress and anxiety during their postsecondary education.

In collaboration with college and university partners, researchers Simon Grégoire, Geneviève Taylor, Lise Lachance (UQAM Department of Education), Thérèse Bouffard (UQAM Department of Psychology), and Louis Richer (UQAC Department of Health Sciences) developed a series of workshops inspired by the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). The workshops are inspired by a third wave cognitive behavioral approach.

*Korsa* workshops help reduce stress, anxiety, and exhaustion among students, while increasing their psychological well-being and fostering academic engagement, **a key factor for success.** ([www.korsa.uqam.ca](http://www.korsa.uqam.ca))

#### Objectives

The workshops are designed to help students acquire strategies to successfully complete their studies while aiming for a balanced life. They help students:

- Identify goals and values that give their lives meaning
- Engage in actions that help them achieve their goals in step with their values
- Identify pitfalls that increase stress and anxiety around their studies
- Implement simple and effective strategies for avoiding these pitfalls
- Develop mindfulness—the ability to be attentive to what is happening in their internal lives with an accepting attitude

Participants practice various forms of meditation and participate in individual and small group exercises and discussions.

## Workshop Structure

Each trainer has a university degree in a client-centered field (e.g., psychology, counseling and guidance, or social work) and provides student assistance at colleges or universities on a regular basis. Trainers are also equipped with a training guide and standardized teaching materials.

The five two-and-a-half hour workshops are offered to groups of 8 to 15 students and feature hands-on exercises such as guided meditation and role playing. They also include psychoeducational videos and podcast exercises. The workshops are interconnected, and students who complete all of them reap the greatest benefit.

## Results

Since 2016 a smartphone app has been used to assess the impact of the workshops on participants. The app makes it possible to survey participants in real time during their daily lives and provides a rigorous, detailed measurement of *Korsa's* effectiveness.

Empirical studies on the workshops show that they help students cultivate psychological flexibility, i.e., the ability to take actions that are consistent with their own values, even when it is difficult or uncomfortable. The workshops are designed to help students develop skills such as:

- Observing and describing internal experiences
- Distancing themselves from anxiety-inducing thoughts
- Acting from awareness rather than rote reflex
- Suspending critical judgements about how they think and feel
- Reducing avoidance behaviors (e.g., drinking, procrastination, etc.)
- Accepting emotions rather than trying to control them
- Identifying their values and acting *in accordance with them*

The workshops have been offered in France since March 2018.





## Further Information

Beresford, B., Laframboise, A., Hontoy, L-M., De Mondehare, L., and Grégoire, S. (2014). "Les ateliers KORSA : la thérapie d'acceptation et d'engagement (ACT) appliquée en milieu universitaire." Session presented as part an Institut de formation en thérapie comportementale et cognitive (IFTCC) conference. Montreal, QC.

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- [www.korsa.uqam.ca](http://www.korsa.uqam.ca)
- [www.facebook.com/Jetienslaroute/](https://www.facebook.com/Jetienslaroute/)



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### > ISSUE

#### “Succeeding” with Cognitive Enhancers: A Coping Strategy for Academic Performance

The issue of college and university students using cognitive enhancers to improve academic performance emerged in the 2000s (Teter et al., 2003; Kroutil et al., 2006) and 2010s (Lakhan and Kirchgessner, 2012; CCSA, 2016). At the same time there was an upsurge in analyses on perfectionism and performance anxiety (Andrews and Wilding, 2004; Sady, 2010; Nelson and Harwood, 2011).

*Cognitive enhancers (smart drugs, psychostimulants, or nootropes) are psychoactive substances known by their trade names (Ritalin®, Adderall®, Concerta®, etc.). They optimize some nervous system capacities, increase concentration and memory tenfold, and reduce the effects of fatigue.*

According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, approximately 4% to 6% of post-secondary students use psychostimulants for nonmedical purposes (CCSA, 2018). But these statistics are variable: some studies report rates of use of up to 43% (ibid.).

The statistical variations in rates of use are explained by the fact that some student users overestimate the number of users to normalize their consumption (one student said “Everyone takes them, they’re like coffee” [as cited in Thoër and Robitaille, 2011]), while others underestimate consumption because of its illicit nature and association with cheating. The results of studies carried out in Quebec (Forlini and Racine, 2009ab; Lebrun, 2016; Thoër and Robitaille, 2011) are consistent with Canadian and American studies, which peg rates of use among students at between 3% and 11%.

#### A Coping Strategy for Demanding and Competitive Environments

Students cite roughly the same reasons for using cognitive enhancers: improving academic performance, compensating for personal limitations, coping with demanding and competitive environments, and assuming multiple social roles (Thoër and Robitaille, 2011).

For some, using psychostimulants is a way to stand out from the pack and rise to the top of their class. They use the drugs to gain an advantage (ibid.). For others it seems to be a strategy for coping with social pressures. Use among these students is not a strategy to be the best, but simply to survive their program and navigate university institutions (ibid.).

Students' use of cognitive enhancers therefore appears to be a *coping strategy* for dealing with the many demands and obstacles they face (Svetlov et al., 2007). The current idea of academic success creates stress among these young adults and one of their responses is to use psychostimulants to juggle work and school, make it through study marathons, complete multiple assignments in a short length of time, stay awake for long stretches, and so on.

## Psychological Dependence

It is not clear whether improvements in academic performance are caused by the drugs themselves. One recent study (CCSA, 2018) showed that students who take psychostimulants actually have *lower grades* than those who do not. In September 2011, three researchers identified the risks of nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (Rosenfield et al., 2011). They argue that the benefits reported by users are a myth, since multiple studies have been unable to show cognitive improvements as a result of psychostimulant use without medical followup.

There is also a documented risk of psychological dependence to cognitive enhancers (Gosselin, 2011; Rouillard as cited in Schneider, 2017). The risk of toxicity and dependence increases if drugs are purchased on the black market due to the possible presence of other substances, including methamphetamine (meth), a highly addictive synthetic drug (Health Canada, 2018).

Students who take cognitive enhancers may develop a psychological dependence by consciously or unconsciously associating good academic performance with their use (Rouillard, as cited in Schneider, 2017). Academic stress is thus alleviated by the act of consumption, which allows students to regain control. The use of cognitive enhancers also prevents students from developing other coping strategies.

Use of these types of substances does not necessarily imply excessive use, but may indicate an episodic form of drug dependence (Thoër, Pierret, and Lévy, 2008).

There is also a risk that some students may continue to use psychostimulants in the workplace after graduation because they have not developed other strategies for coping with stress.



## Ease of Access

Psychostimulants are readily available both legally and illegally. It is relatively easy to determine the symptoms of cognitive disorders online, which can increase ADHD diagnoses and illegitimate prescriptions. Many students obtain the substances from acquaintances or friends who have prescriptions (Teter et al., 2003).

Many students are introduced to the substances by friends or classmates (Thoër and Robitaille, 2011). Some decide to try them because they have heard about them on campus. Others test the drugs in microdoses to determine the cognitive potential and limits of the substances in order to control their own use.

## Prevention and Promotion

The prevalence of cognitive enhancer use appears to have several causes, including normalization of use without medical followup, increase in social pressure to perform, ease of access, and the fact that many young adults wish to balance their school, work, and social lives at a time when the focus on individual performance is ever stronger (Thoër and Robitaille, 2011). Along with these factors there is a lack of alternative strategies for students in demanding situations where they are expected to achieve success without failure in the name of performance and productivity (Carle, 2017).

Given the prevalence of use, it is important to raise young people's awareness of the actual impacts and side effects of using these drugs, particularly when they are used as a "psychological crutch" (Rouillard, as cited in Schneider, 2017), which can lead to dependence problems.

In a recent study, Lebrun (2016) recommended that intervention programs address the use of psychostimulants more explicitly by developing information campaigns on their *long-term* effects.

The study, which was founded on a program-based approach at universities and colleges, also recommended that professors should consult one another when setting due dates for assignments and scheduling exams. For example, a shared assessment schedule would be relatively simple to implement.

As the use of cognitive enhancers is a growing concern at postsecondary institutions, we need to think about how to address the problem to avoid shifting the burden of adapting to the demands of college and university life onto individuals. Surveying college and university students on how they understand, discuss, and interpret success (see Key Concept: What Is Success?) is a constructive jumping-off point for such reflection.





## Further Information

### Tools, Projects, and Websites

- [Take Your Pills](#), documentary by Alison Klayman, 2018
- [Building Strengths-Based Resilience in Students](#), Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health
- [Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, Featured Projects](#)
- [Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction](#)
- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#)
- [Quebec Addiction Prevention Centre](#)
- [Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses](#)
- [More Feet on the Ground](#), Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health
- [The Flourish Program](#), Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health
- [Staying on Track](#), Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (Australia)
- [ThriveRU](#), Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health
- [Trousse Gestion du stress et anxiété](#), Université de Montréal Faculty of Medicine

### Reports and Theses

CCSA, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (2018). ["Non-medical Prescription Stimulant Use among Post-secondary Students"](#), 23 p.

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### > KEY CONCEPT

#### What Is Success?

A performance-based interpretation of success can contribute to the development of coping strategies, including the use of psychostimulants (see *Issue: “Succeeding” with Cognitive Enhancers*). Students who use them perceive that academic success is increasingly demanding and that the workload is excessive and even unmanageable (Thoër and Robitaille, 2011). Others believe that performing across a number of spheres and activities (academic, sports, social, etc.) is a personal choice (Van Caloen, 2004) to live an active lifestyle (Forlini and Racine, 2009).

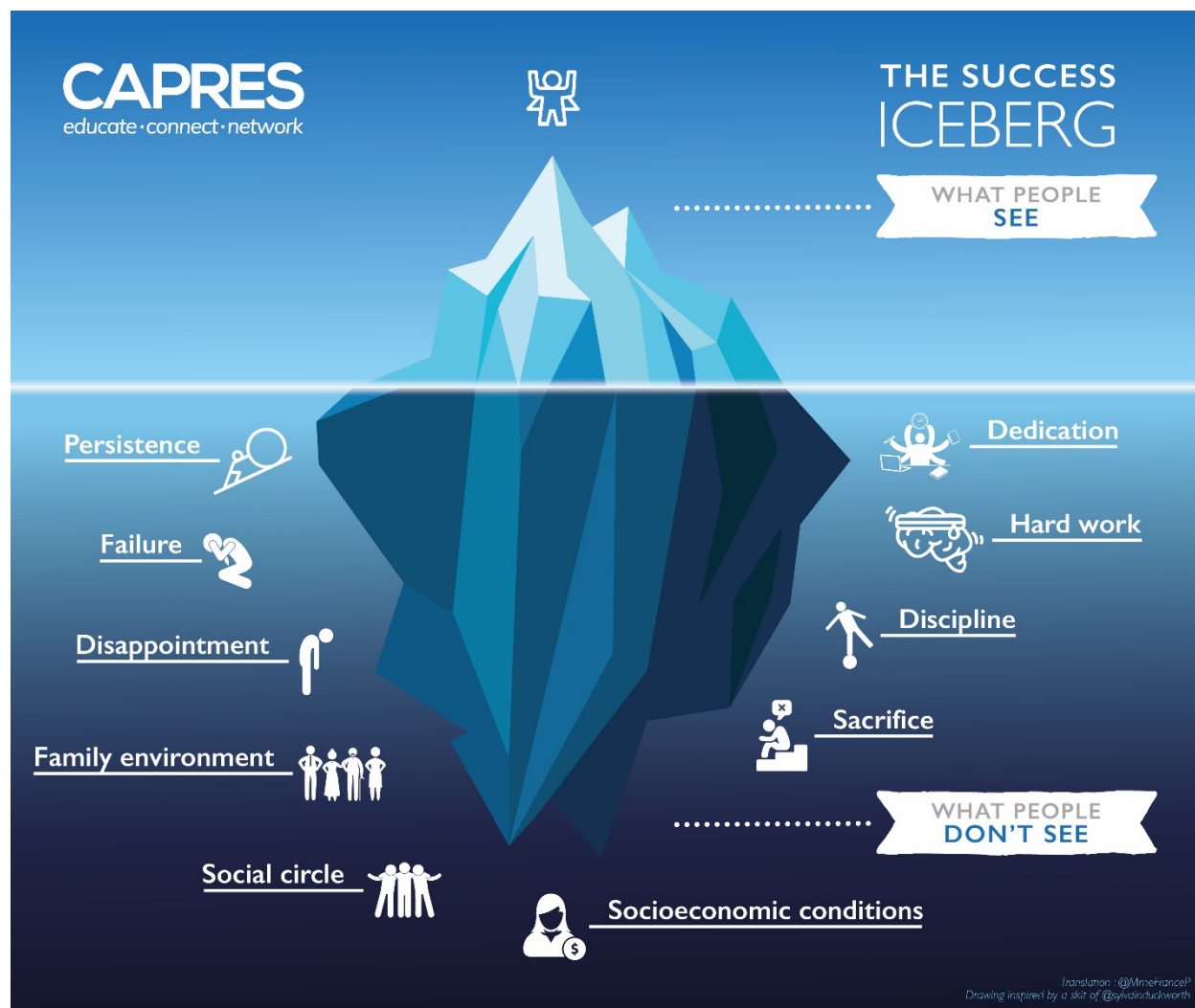
These observations by students who use psychostimulants about their environments can function as a starting point for reflecting on how to define success in education.

#### Success: An Individual Achievement?

One interpretation of success hinges on the notion of achievement: individual will and hard work are enough to succeed independently of acquired resources and strategies for balancing multiple roles (student, employee, parent, etc.) and underlying social and economic inequalities. This view places full responsibility for success or failure on individuals (Raynal, 2008).

But while it is well documented that individual effort is a key component of success, family, educational, and social factors are also important (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017), as shown in the following illustration:

Fig. 1. Success Factors: The Iceberg Metaphor



The iceberg metaphor shows the multiple individual, family, and social success factors that often lie beneath the surface at first glance.

## Success: Academic or Educational?

Student success has evolved over time (Chenard and Fortier, 2005) and is a polysemic and multidimensional term (Laferrière et al., 2011; Romainville, 2015).

The notion of **academic success** mainly refers to achieving learning objectives and mastering knowledge. Measurable indicators include academic results, acquired credits, and recognition of prior learning



through diplomas (Michaut and Romainville, 2012). Academic success thus carries connotations of productivity and performance (CREPAS, as cited in *Savoir*, 2016) in the achievement of measurable results.

For the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, success is understood broadly as follows:

Students succeed each time they successfully break through the barriers and critical thresholds that inevitably punctuate their studies, from acceptance into university to social and occupational integration at the end of their studies (CSE, 2013).

**Educational success** takes this view and is multidimensional, encompassing instruction (knowledge integration), socialization (acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes, and behaviors that are useful for functioning in society), and qualification (preparation for social and occupational integration) (Carle, 2017). The realization of students' full potential and the achievement of their goals are also important aspects of the concept (CRÉPAS, 2018). In terms of higher education it is necessary to take students' personal development and social integration into account, in addition to their academic progress (CTREQ, as cited in Laferriere et al., 2011).

Successful education leads students to make significant progress at each stage in their evolution; develop broad, solid, and interconnected cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socioaffective skills specific to higher education; and realize their potential with regard to their future, their ability to face obstacles, and achieve their objectives through a positive attitude (Vasseur, 2015).

The advantage of this view of success is that it includes important aspects of human development like civic identity and a clear career path. It goes beyond strictly academic success, which is sometimes reduced to the acquisition of a performance-based diploma and the marks credited towards it (Lapointe and Sirois, 2011).

## Success as a Process

While academic success tends to put greater weight on measurable performance indicators, educational success is viewed from a more sociological perspective (Michaut and Romainville, 2012) that takes a more upstream approach by examining what "success in school" means to the student.



The view of success as a *process* (Glasman, 2007), which includes forks in the road, failure, and disappointment (see Figure 1), is a promising avenue. From this perspective, success is not the binary opposite of failure. Something that is perceived as a failure can be part of a successful long-term process. For example, Millet's study (as cited by Romainville, 2015) shows that the "massive failures" of university undergraduates can be seen as a necessary stage in their reorientation toward other programs, jobs, or life directions.

Viewing success as a process (Glasman, 2007) also leaves more room for the development of various coping strategies (time planning and management, effective study strategies, mentoring, etc.). It also takes students' individual, family, social, and economic inequalities into account (ibid.).

The conception of success as a process makes it possible to reexamine the notion and practices of performance to reframe school success as something based more on individual and social development rather than marks and credits. In this sense, altering perceptions about success and failure can be a starting point for prevention and recovery for students with mental health problems (see Issue: Upstream Initiatives to Improve Mental Health Among College and University Students).

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### > KEY CONCEPT

#### What Is Performance Anxiety?

Although performance anxiety is not a new phenomenon, it is exacerbated by the current conception of success without failure (Ramirez, 2018). Often associated with assessment-related situations, it may involve avoidance or compulsive behaviors, such as using psychostimulants to study for long periods (Service de psychologie et d'orientation, Université de Sherbrooke, 2011).

Students who experience performance anxiety tend to overestimate the “danger” involved in assessment situations (e.g., exams) and underestimate their ability to act in response to this danger (Lupien, as cited in Barriault, 2016).

The characteristics of stressful situations are lack of control, unpredictability, novelty, and the ego of the person involved (Centre for Studies on Human Stress, 2018)

The more a situation—or rather an individual’s interpretation of it—has these characteristics, the more it will be perceived as stressful by students. Anticipation of assessments can thus be worse than the assessments themselves: stress hormones are secreted constantly and it becomes difficult to judge whether the situation is actually threatening (ibid.). In other words, the warning signals become inaccurate, like an oversensitive alarm system (Langlois, 2017).

#### Symptoms

Performance anxiety has a range of symptoms that can be divided into four categories (ibid.):

##### ➤ Thoughts

- Negative perception of self in academic contexts
- Prevalence of negative thoughts such as “I’m going to fail” and “I’m not good enough”



### ➤ Emotions

- Heightened fear, stress, and discomfort during assessments
- Fear of performing poorly on exams or in other assessment situations (oral presentations, team projects, etc.)
- Potential for panic attacks before or during assessments (Langlois, 2017)

In a recent study by Gosselin and Ducharme (2017), 35% of college students surveyed experienced anxiety “often” or “all the time.” Thirty-three percent reported feeling “a lot” or “enormous amounts” of pressure to perform academically.

### ➤ Behavior

- Avoiding criticism and assessment situations due to fear of failure
- Constantly seeking positive feedback
- Exaggerated pursuit of perfection and perfectionism (a significant factor in depression [Lupien, 2015])
- Tendency to study excessively and exhaustively and excessive attention to detail

### ➤ Psychological

- Presence of debilitating somatic anxiety disorders in the face of approaching assessments or deadlines, e.g., insomnia, migraines, digestive disorders, muscle tension, etc. (Langlois, 2017).

## Multiple Causes

A number of psychological causes of performance anxiety have been identified (Service de psychologie et d'orientation, Université de Sherbrooke, 2011), including:

- Low sense of self-efficacy: an individual's judgement of their ability to perform a given task.
- Low self esteem: an individual's perception of their own worth.
- Erroneous beliefs: irrational, anxiety-generating thoughts individuals have about themselves, the world, and the future. Examples include:
  - All-or-nothing thinking: “If I don't pass this exam, I'll never be good enough”
  - Generalization and catastrophizing (Langlois, 2017): “I failed one exam, I'm going to fail them all”
  - Belief that failure is intolerable because it would imply incompetence and lack of value as a person: “I cannot be loved for who I am, only for what I accomplish” (Brillon, 2015)
  - Adherence to extreme ideals of success
  - Perception that qualitative success (grades, diploma) is more important than learning





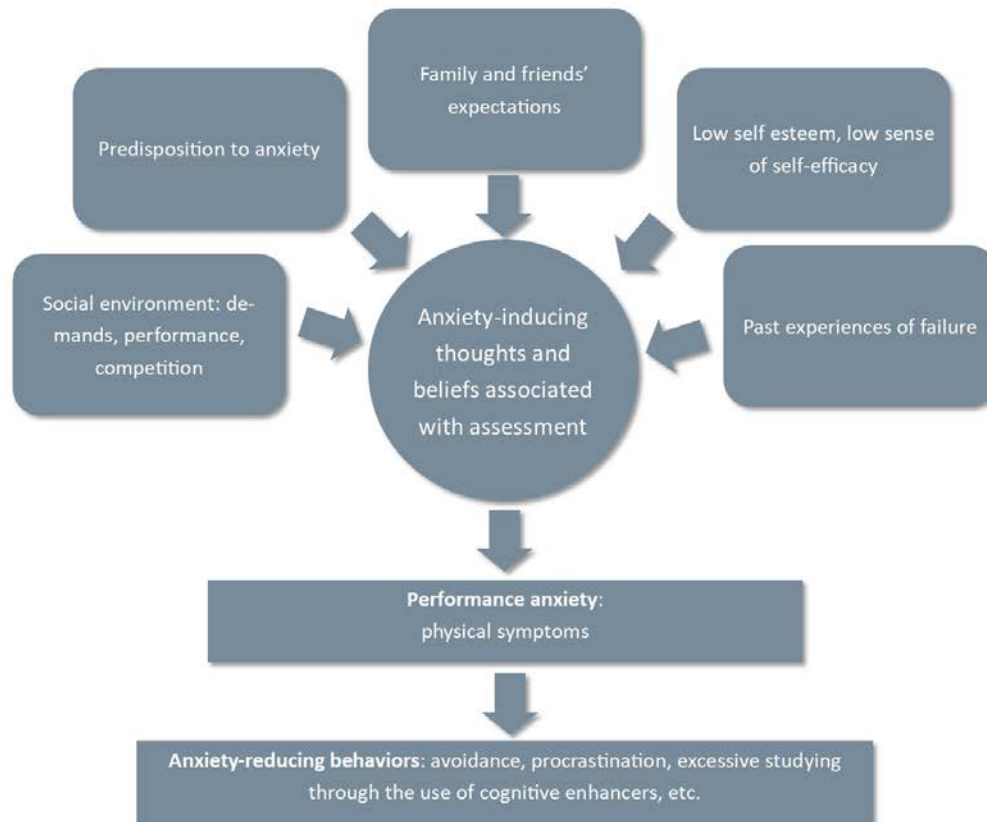
### *Family and Social Factors*

Performance anxiety can emerge early in childhood. Unrealistic expectations harbored by some parents can lead to performance anxiety in children, even during their transition to adulthood—instead of perceiving assessment situations as ways to improve or opportunities to learn, these individuals think in terms of success or failure (Robidoux, 2016).

According to Pascale Brillon, a psychologist who specializes in anxiety, a number of **social factors** can explain the rise in performance anxiety. She points to the effects of social media in terms of recognition and the need to be seen by others. New technologies open the door to permanent availability and comparisons with “extreme ideals” (Brillon, 2015). By allowing others to constantly view and weigh in on their individual achievements (e.g., running a marathon or graduating), some people feel like outside expectations are so high that they must continually achieve more to gain social approval (ibid.). Causes are not only individual; the values upheld by our society fixated on performance and hyperproductivity, which can exert strong pressure on individuals (Collin, 2015), also warrant examination.



## Causes and Behaviors Linked to Performance Anxiety (Inspired by Service de psychologie et d'orientation, Université de Sherbrooke, 2011)



### Courses of Action

The impact of social factors on the development of performance anxiety shows the importance for postsecondary education institutions to develop individual, institutional, and structural courses of action (see [Issue: Upstream Initiatives to Improve Mental Health Among College and University Students](#))

At the individual level, it is important to encourage students to take symptoms of anxiety seriously and urge them to turn to resources that can help them be mindful of their internal patterns. Students may well have symptoms without realizing they are anxious. Performance anxiety is one of the most straightforward disorders to treat using therapy (Lupien, as cited in Barriault, 2016). The suggested exercises aim specifically to accustom individuals to thinking differently when faced with situations perceived as being threatening.



Psychological help that encourages individuals to reflect on perfectionism and examine their conception of success and individual self-worth can be beneficial (Robidoux, 2016).

At the institutional level, various workshops on study strategies (stress management, mindfulness activities, relaxation, yoga, etc.) can be provided and augmented with assistance from learning support counsellors (ibid.). It is also important to foster a culture that encourages individuals to seek help (Ramirez, 2018), especially in highly demanding fields where students are used to being high achievers.

In addition to taking individual, clinical, and campus-wide actions that promote students' overall mental health, education institutions can help students question the values upheld by society so they do not lose sight of the fact that excelling is primarily about achievement, development, and positive—rather than negative—feelings (Collin, 2015).

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## > INSPIRING PRACTICE

### The Flourish Program: *Fostering Emotional and Social Growth*

The Flourish Program<sup>1</sup> aims to help Ontario students who are transitioning to university identify their internal strengths. The program takes a proactive approach to ensure students learn to effectively manage stress and adopt a range of coping strategies to ease the transition to postsecondary education.

The program is modeled on a plant-based metaphor: students will grow if campuses create the proper conditions for their development. Through collaboration between six departments, the University of Toronto – Scarborough Campus is striving to become a model for academic transition that helps students from diverse backgrounds realize their potential through actions, habits, skills, and strategies.



More specifically, the Flourish Program teaches students to draw on their own strengths to succeed and feel good, get involved in meaningful extracurricular activities, and develop skills for coping with the ups and downs of postsecondary education.

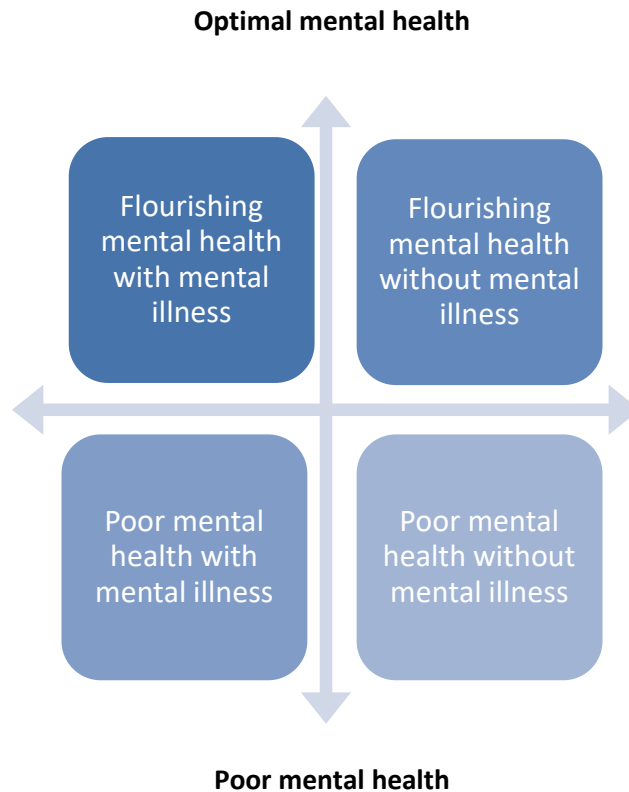
### Approach

The project is based on a model developed by psychosociologist Corey Keyes (as cited by CICMH, 2018) in which the absence of symptoms of mental illness does not necessarily mean the presence of good mental health (see the Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health and Mental Illness in Key Concept: What Are Mental Health and Mental Disorders?). Keyes argues that mental health is situated on a continuum between flourishing and languishing. In his study of adolescents (age 12 to 18), he found that about 38% were flourishing, 56% were moderate, and 6% were languishing.

<sup>1</sup> Students are approximately the same age as Cégep students in Quebec.



## Model of Flourishing and Languishing Mental Health (UTSC, 2018)



### Objectives

The Flourish Project aims to support students in identifying their academic and personal strengths with a view to improving academic performance and overall well-being (UTSC, 2018).

The program aims to teach coping strategies for dealing with the transition to postsecondary education by building on students' inner academic and personal strengths.

Identifying personal strengths, or *signature strengths*, helps students develop a “safe” internal space they can turn to in times of upheaval, disappointment, and failure. According to this approach, self-esteem is not defined strictly by academic achievement and students lean on other inner strengths to face adversity.

“Corrective” approaches aimed at remedying weaknesses are considered insufficient. Without neglecting, minimizing, or ignoring stress, symptoms of depression, or anxiety, the Flourish Program strives to help students identify and build on their most important assets—their inner strengths—to grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially.

Although it is in line with the positive psychology approach, the Flourish program eschews the magical thinking of old chestnuts like “where there’s a will, there’s a way” or “the sky is the limit.” Instead, it teaches students how to use their strengths to overcome stress, sadness, anger, and anxiety, to shift negative thoughts, and to be resilient in the face of negative experiences.

## Hands-on Approach

As part of its approach to mental health promotion and prevention, all UTSC students can participate in the program, not just those with mental health issues. The purpose of the online profiles is for students to examine their levels of stress and well-being, their academic habits (e.g., exam preparation strategies), their involvement on campus, and their ability to cope with academic stress.

More specifically, creating a Flourish profile helps students identify their:

- Signature strengths: Distinctive strengths, such as creativity, kindness, and social intelligence, can be built, even on fragile foundations. These are not talents such as athletic ability, which can be improved, but are often limited by genetics.
- Well-being: Positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, purpose, and learning are part of well-being.
- Stress: Signs and symptoms of sadness, stress, anxiety, conflicts with others, and difficulty concentrating and fulfilling social roles are explored.
- Academic involvement: Examples include academic habits (doing readings, preparing for exams and oral presentations), commitment to academic success, participation in extracurricular activities, the ability to use appropriate on-campus support services, and the ability to bounce back from academic failure.

This initial reflexive exercise helps raise awareness among students, who can then participate in workshops offered by student services. These group and individual workshops help foster emotional and social growth among students. Facilitators also present various on - and off - campus resources that are available to students.





The ultimate goal of the program is to help students acquire the skills they need to understand and identify stress factors and their internal resources, vulnerabilities, and values in order to develop psychological and academic resilience.

Students in the Flourish program who are having psychological difficulties or who are in distress may be referred to learning advisors, career counsellors, or psychologists. At this stage, students with specific mental health problems such as problematic substance use, can access counselling, guidance, and support to develop other coping strategies.

The program also features an extensive collection of online resources, including illustrations of evidence-based strategies for improving well-being and stress management and important tips for educational success.

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### > INSPIRING PRACTICE

#### Project – *More Feet on the Ground: Recognize, Respond, and Refer*

This mental health project is focused on substance use. Developed by the Council of Ontario Universities, Brock University, and the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH), this online [resource](#) is a one-stop shop for helping campus professionals, faculty, and administration learn to recognize, respond, and refer students with substance use and addiction problems to appropriate resources.

#### Three-Step Process

The project demystifies alcohol and drug use and addiction, observing that many people use substances to relax or cope with stress. But for some, substance use or the adoption of certain behaviors can become problematic and lead to addiction.

Addiction can be broadly defined as a multifactorial condition that leads to compulsive behavior involving one or more substances, despite negative consequences on the user, their family and friends, and the various spheres of their life (CICMH, 2018).

#### Recognize

The 4C approach is a simple way to recognize signs of addiction (CICMH, 2018):

- *Cravings*, overwhelming urges to use drugs
- A loss of *control* over the quantity or frequency of use
- *Compulsion*, consuming to quell cravings
- Consuming despite negative *consequences*, also known as harms

In addition to providing a profile of the use of various substances in Canada, *More Feet on the Ground* looks at the spectrum of addiction, with and without harms.

## Addiction Spectrum (adapted from CICMH, 2018)



Students who use substances don't necessarily become addicted—substance abuse is often linked to a person's experiences, mental health, and behavioral patterns (ibid.)

### Respond and Refer

Recognizing and identifying a student's addiction problem does not necessarily mean the student recognizes the problem. The project provides two options for concrete response and referral strategies for individuals wishing to guide students to appropriate resources:

- If an individual has an established relationship with a student, speaking with them directly and expressing concerns about specific observed behaviors may be the best option.
- If no relationship has been established, it is best to ask a support resource for advice on how to approach the situation.

Students who are experiencing psychological distress may express anger or frustration and act inappropriately or even disruptively. But disruptive behavior is not always a sign that a student does not want help. A database of on-campus mental health services was developed as part of the program as an aid for referring students to appropriate resources.

Referring students with substance use problems can sometimes mean directing them to general mental health resources. Mental health and addiction to psychoactive substances are mutually influential. Addiction-related mental health problems are known as concurrent disorders. Research shows that over 50% of individuals who seek help for substances use problems also have mental health problems (ibid.).

The project aims to develop upstream coping strategies (see Issue: Upstream Initiatives), that focus on the importance of social connections. Some aspects of students' lives, such as participating in meaningful activities and being connected to positive and reliable support communities, may make them less susceptible to addiction problems. As one addiction researcher states "connection is the opposite of addiction" (Maté, 2008, as cited by CICMH, 2018).

## References

CICMH (2018). More Feet on the Ground.



### **Visit**

<http://www.capres.ca/dossiers/sante-mentale-etudiants-collegiaux-universitaires/> to view the full report on mental health.



### **To Cite this Report**

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